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AUTHOR Harrington, David V.
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ABSTRACT

One approach to teaching organization to a writing class is to subdivide the organizational processes. One subdivision recognizes that certain compositions have a predictable format--they put expected parts in predictable places. Following a format at appropriate times is a skill that should be taught, or at least insisted upon, at the beginning of a writing course. The second subdivision involves helping the writer pull together or make sense of the hazy strands or ill-fitting parts of an original idea. The third subdivision entails one of the last things a writer does--include organizational signals to indicate to readers what they should expect and to show how the various parts of a composition interrelate. Presenting these subdivisions of organization shows students that organizing requires many different intellectual tasks and demands an understanding of the structural needs of different kinds of writing assignments. Such an approach also requires the development of more varied assignments that challenge students in as many organizational tasks as possible. Rather than relay the instructions given in current textbooks, teachers should advise their sudents that their writing will be organized if they let the reader know what to expect and then satisfy that expectation. (HOD)

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David V. Harrington
Gustavus Adolphus College
St. Peter, MN 56082

NEEDED CHANGES IN TEACHING ORGANIZATION

We tend to lump together a lot of vaguely related synonyms when we speak of teaching organization to a writing class. We may equate organization with arrangement, form, structure or dispositio; we may refer to coherence, cohesion, consistency, or unity; or we may insist upon proper sequence, patterns, order, or format. I can't say whether anyone here uses all these terms interchangeably in teaching. Very few students, I suspect, see them all as synonymous. But I find all of these and more turning up, but not all together in the typical, brief chapters on organization, arrangement, unity or whatever in various textbooks. Generally there is only one chapter; in fact, the author of a textbook usually skips past these terms rapidly anyway to show us the standard types of organization instead. We never find much about principles of arrangement or about the process of giving structure or form to a composition; rather, we gain instructions for such rhetorical modes as narration, definition, comparison and contrast, and argument. If we use a collection of readings, we encourage students to imitate the patterns in such great essays as Swift's "A Modest Proposal," Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant," and White's "The Second Tree from the Corner." In this presentation, I will not show you how to pull all of these terms and teaching techniques together. Instead, I suggest we work harder at subdividing the organizational processes. We should point out the many different intellectual activities that contribute to organization.

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In rough outline, let me suggest at least three radically different subdivisions of organization. They are separate in time, in qualitative demands upon the intellect, and probably in mood or feeling while we are engaged in each. First, we call it organization when we point to certain kinds of compositions as having a predictable format. Robert A. Day, for example, claims a scientific paper should be organized with Introduction first, then Materials and Methods, then Results, and finally Discussion: in that order and no other. Or we might show students the format for a chemistry lab report or for a job resume. Some teachers will spell out the separate parts of a research paper just as they spell out the peculiarities of a commonly used word. Following the format means putting expected parts in predictable places. This aspect of organization comes into consideration most likely right at the start when giving the assignment, or when accepting a writing task. It needs teaching, or at least insisting upon, in appropriate cases, and probably right at the beginning. What the writer needs is dutifulness or submissiveness to follow the demands of the format.

But there are other organizational concerns that differ substantially from format. If we keep up with recent developments in composition teaching and encourage rhetorical invention in our writing assignments, we must work with a second and much more difficult subdivision of organization: we must help the writer pull together or make sense of the hazy strands or ill-fitting parts of an original idea that this person is just in process of discovering for the first time for herself. We need to help the student to build a verbal structure that hasn't previously existed. The person who gathers a lot of relevant but varied data that has never been assembled before needs to arrange it in an orderly way. How does she find an appropriate sequence for these

separate parts? Or how does she help readers understand her composition as a meaningful and manageable structure? The act of creating a new solution for a problem or of presenting a distinctive interpretation of data cannot be aided very often by pointing to a standard format or by recommending the chapter on rhetorical modes. The task of organizing an original idea corresponds with the discovery or creation of this idea. It calls for boldness and imagination, not submissiveness to rules or format.

The third subdivision of organization is important also, though somewhat easier than shaping a new idea. It should be one of the last things a writer does: the inclusion of organizational signals to indicate to readers what they should expect, and to show how the various parts of a composition interrelate. Kenneth Burke, in Counter-Statement, gives us a helpful definition that, I think, points to this aspect of organization:

> Form in literature is an arousing and fulfillment of desires. A work has form in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence.

When saying this, Burke was concerned with literary analysis, but the principles apply to expository or other kinds of writing as well. Most generally, except for the previously mentioned standardized or predictable formats, readers do not worry about the form of a composition unless the sequence seems faulty or bothersome. Most of us can even follow meandering detours if the road signs are clear enough. Let us not insist on absolute ideals for organization. Many compositions like narration or those with standardized formats are so easy to concentrate on, that we practically forget about or unconsciously avoid troublesome problems in organization.

If we limit our assignments in such ways, we rarely challenge students' organizing abilities. But, even when students do struggle with relatively intractable materials, when they don't know how to make sense out of fragmentary parts, we should assure them that many ideas can be arranged in lots of different ways. Some signals are patch jobs, but they work. What counts, so far as readers are concerned, is giving the impression of orderliness; or in closer conformity to Burke's definition: first to signal to readers what they should expect, and then to fulfill or satisfy those expectations. Skillful writers use transitional devices, but also a multitude of other signalling techniques to show the audience what will follow and how the separate parts cohere. To deal with this subdivision or organization, a writer needs moral qualities: sensitivity, concern for others, and perhaps humility.

My earlier language when identifying format as a subdivision of organization may have seemed derogatory. Following the format generally means following simple, perhaps invariable, instructions. But it usually means a great deal more than just filling in the blanks for an objective test. I can imagine very difficult writing assignments that, for organization, call primarily for faithful adherence to format. Actually imitating Swift's "A Modest Proposal," as was suggested earlier, would mean imagining an idea of one's own with the same sequence of parts, however they are identified: with description of the problem, the author's purpose and credentials, preparatory statistics, other authoritative studies, procedures, anticipated objections, recitation of six major advantages, rejection of alternative solutions, willingness to listen to better answers (if there are any), and evidence of the author's detached disinterestness. Finding such an idea and

following all these steps would not be easy. The editor of the journal for which I write book reviews, for that matter, outlines the desired substance in a review in such detail that the outline constitutes a restrictive format. She want to know what new information comes in the book, the author's method of investigation and qualifications, how this book compares with similar studies, and what audience it aims at. But format as organization means mostly the sequence of expected parts, each of which may need its own organizing in a very different sense.

The less definite structure when organizing an original idea needs explanation in the context of whatever methods one uses for rhetorical invention. Even after the usual preliminary steps for formulating a good scholarly theory, after discovering and defining a problem worth solving that stimulates a desire to gather relevant data, after proposing and testing alternative hypotheses with experiments or key evidence--a good researcher can still have serious trouble presenting his findings in orderly, understandable language. Such a person, no matter how knowledgeable about the subject matter and no matter how sophisticated in verbal skills or style, must accept as fact that he cannot depend upon previous patterns for organizing a new, unpredictable idea. But we can give instructions just the same.

Let me illustrate how to give such instructions with a rather far-out example. In a course in Research and Writing, I have asked students to look at how published scholars organize their ideas; my students have to study organization in four or five papers in a scholarly journal in their major field. That is, they need to size up the organizational skills of each of these authors. This seems like an original assignment. I don't know of

anyone else who has written papers on such a subject. To be sure, I have given these students lots of ideas about organization to look for, (much the same brand of thinking as is in this paper); but I cannot tell them what they will find. What they will read in some journals are greatly varied articles. And closer to our immediate concern, the students have no preexisting patterns to imitate, when writing their own papers on organization, to organize this heretofore unexamined data. The subject matter may seem odd, but the organizational challenge is real.

Here is the typically messy sequence in an essay we worked on in class. The students noticed that the author's opening assertion was hedged with a vulnerable qualifier: "Scientists tend to keep up a polite fiction that all science is equal." The phrasing causes us to suspect that our author will expose this delusion. This hint is followed by more easily identified signals: a concession, a contrasting transition, a rhetorical question, an inadequate answer, a better answer (which is the major thesis), a definition, an analogy, a concession, an emphatic transition, a rhetorical question, an analogy and a contrasting transition. This much we noticed in the first three pages. Such limited data may not represent the author's usual organizational techniques. But if they do, in order to write about his organization, we still need to create a structure out of our mixture of findings. How do we do it? We can start by itemizing each of the techniques (analogy, definition, concession, rhetorical question, etc.). Perhaps we can count the examples of each technique to discover the author's special strengths or preferences. We can group like things together (concessions and inadequate answers, for example) to form a more manageable classification.

We can try to see relationships between separate organizing techniques.

For example, when he asks a rhetorical question, does he usually answer it first with the inadequate answer that most people are likely to think of? But the concessions come in this spot fairly often, too. The author is not overthrowing the whole establishment. He is asking for greater consistency. We could evaluate the effectiveness or variety or subtlety of this writer's tactics as part of his style. We may even speculate about how the author's organizational skills aid him in creating or discovering his own idea. In short, we should draw conclusions about what we have found.

One might properly say that much of the task of organizing evidence concerning organization suggested above is really an exercise in invention, and so it is; but it is arrangement, or building a structure, or trying for appropriate sequence as well. Students must learn to create a new form all by themselves. All of you can probably think of more interesting assignments to get at the same general tasks in organization. Whatever your assignment, you would be helping your students if you force them to struggle with the task of creating order out of something they have never seen arranged before. You would help them even more, however, if you teach them in addition, how to identify and enumerate their raw data, to look for relationships, how to elaborate, evaluate, draw conclusions from, or interpret this newly organized material. To a great extent, this is what we mean by creating and giving form to an idea.

Even the most difficult tasks in organization can be compromised, however. Rather than insisting upon perfection, we should advise students to consider what bother readers in a seemingly poorly organized essay. Commonly enough readers will wonder about fauly organization even in a paper which needs no great changes in arrangement. They may feel there is no sense

of direction or progression; it is hard to pick out or remember the writer's main point; they encounter unexpected or undesirable surprises; or expectations are left unfulfilled. For each of these problems, the writer needs to give clearer or more appropriate signals. Most often students need to rewrite their beginnings--titles, opening paragraphs, introductory reviews of purpose and methods--to direct attention to what will follow and in what order. Clarity in structure cannot always be kept separate from clarity in style. To give a sense of order, however, a writer may get by with rather arbitrary arrangement of materials. A somewhat faulty student paper analyzing a poem by Sylvia Plath made me think about how little we need say sometimes about arrangement in a physical sense for parts of an intellectual idea. After his introduction, the student presented separate paragraphs on topics in this order 1) metrics and stanza form, 2) unhappiness, 3) setting, 4) personality of the speaker, 5) unhappiness again, and 6) the moral lesson that we should be more sensitive to each other. The different parts, with one exception, seemed justified in sequence as he showed relationships between the parts and moved from one paragraph to the next. I scolded him for faulty organization because of the two separated paragraphs on unhappiness: they contained different words but the same content. He made a mistake, but a mistake comparable to a typographical error. It needs pointing out, but not a special lecture on organizational principles. On the other hand, he would have spotted the error himself if he had given us a simple list of topics to be covered at the beginning of the paper tipping us off to what we should expect. Except for the obvious error, I wonder whether other students working with the same material would have organized their papers better. Chances are, the sequence for different students would have varied greatly. What was needed, though, was not a better sequence but reliable signals for what was to follow.

Often one needs only a few sentences at the start to give a semblance of order, a few transitions to show how the different parts interrelate, and a concluding statement identifying the significance of what preceded, to transform a wilderness into a formal garden. Inexperienced writers often have such purposes, connections, and implications in their minds while composing. But they need moral injunctions to consider and explicitly cater to the needs and desires of their readers while revising.

For a more specific and sophisticated example, a student wrote a most promising essay describing the intense desire of young women in nineteenth century English fiction to get married. The student's purpose was clear; she quoted illustrative passages in which young women revealed their anxiety in conversations or personal thoughts. The student also analyzed systematically and convincingly the social, economic, and psychological conditions contributing to such intense concern. The tone was serious; the style was concise and objective. Then, in the next-to-last paragraph, she described her personal interest in marriage. It would be o.k., but wasn't essential. There were moments in high school, especially when no one invited her to the junior prom, when the prospect of never marrying looked frightening. But now that she is getting a college education, she can manage, with or without. At first reading, this shift to personal experience seemed abrupt and out of place. What had been scholarly and objective suddenly became intimate and subjective. The contrast in tone and personal reference, struck me at first as not only surprising but momentarily ludicrous. It was faulty organization. And yet, as I thought about it later, what she said about her own feelings as a modern woman related interestingly to her study of nineteenth century fictional equivalents. It was a valid comparison. But is came as a surprise.

Correcting the problem in organization required little more than a hint that such a comparison was forthcoming. We needed a clearer signal of what to expect.

The suggestions I make in this presentation are necessarily fragmentary and probably overstated in a few places. My intention is to urge two major changes, at least, from the instructions I see in popular textbooks, or hear in lectures at professional conferences. The one needed change is showing how organization means a lot of quite different intellectual tasks. It calls for greatly varying personal qualities with different kinds of writing assignments and calls for them at different times or different places even when one is working on the same assignment. The second needed change is development of more varied assignments, that challenge students in as many organizational tasks as possible. The restriction to standardized formats with major emphasis upon imitation or the continuing popularity of writing personal experience narratives mean limited experience in organization. They mean hardly any exercise in struggling to create an intelligible structure out of newly gathered data. To make such changes, we must prepare ourselves to give students more assistance than they can find in current textbooks on how to sort out and then tie things together. But we can help them to make these difficult tasks easier also. We can more candidly describe what readers need: not really an absolute or perfect arrangement: but an approximate sense of order. Most readers will feel satisfied that what they are reading seems organized if the writer lets them know what to expect and then satisfies that expectation. We should advise students on how to provide for and then satisfy such expectations.

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the Minnesota Council of Teachers of English in Minneapolis, May 6, 1983.